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Essex council criticised over £8m plan to evict Travellers

Gypsy Council says move to clear illegal Dale Farm camp on greenbelt area would be a waste of taxpayers' money

Stephen Bates

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A [video](#) / [audio](#)



Children play at Dale

Farm camp in Essex, which hosts the largest community of Travellers in the UK.

Photograph: Susan Craig-Greene

The Gypsy Council has accused an Essex council of wasting taxpayers' money after it voted to devote up to £8m – a quarter of its annual budget – to evicting Traveller families from Britain's largest illegal site, in a greenbelt area near a local village.

Basildon's Tory-controlled council took the decision after an eight-year wrangle with the families occupying the site at Dale Farm, near Crays Hill village. It originally obtained an eviction order in 2005, but legal appeals mean the site – originally on an illegal scrapyard that has been occupied by Travellers' caravans since 2001 – has grown and now has up to 500 residents. Once a new order is served they will have 28 days to clear the site, although no date has been fixed.

Some newspapers quoted residents as planning to physically fight their eviction and accusing the council of ethnic cleansing. A notice stating "We won't go" has been hung over the site's entrance. Nora Gore, a mother of two children, told the Daily Mirror: "We will gas them, we will burn them if we have to, but we are going to fight. We are not going to go."

Newspaper estimates have put the cost of clearing the site at £18m, with more than half being spent on policing, bailiff costs and further litigation, but that would be based on a continuous operation lasting up to two months.

Candy Sheridan, vice-chair of the Gypsy Council, who has relatives living at the site, said she had been in prolonged negotiations with the council to obtain planning permission for other brownfield sites in the area. She said: "The council is posturing. We can save them an absolute fortune by finding alternative sites. The way they are going about things will cost a huge amount in jobs and services.

"Now they have passed this resolution they can go off for a month to get themselves re-elected in the local elections. It is a win-win situation for them: they have talked tough and we will apply for another site which does not cost them a penny."

Tony Ball, the council's leader, said: "No one wants a forced clearance of this site and we have spent 10 years asking the Travellers to work with us to seek a peaceful resolution. However, it is important the law is applied equally and fairly to all people.

"If we do not take action in this case, we would have little moral right as a planning authority to take action against future unauthorised developments. That would set a very dangerous precedent."

He added: "We have tried to work with the families concerned to find a peaceful resolution but, after 10 years of continued and illegal development of the green belt, we must draw a line under the matter and take action. However, even at this late stage I am still open to constructive conversations with the Travellers at Dale Farm."

Following the earlier dismissal of an appeal against eviction in 2006, John Prescott, the then first secretary of state, allowed the travellers two years to find somewhere else to live legally. Local village residents claim they have been abused by the site's occupants, that property values have been affected and that the local village school's academic results have fallen as its roll has filled with children from the site.

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